

FOCUS

Elevating the Essentials to **Radically Improve** Student Learning

By
Mike Schmoker

“Failure to improve our schools in the last few decades isn’t because we lack funding or don’t know how to improve schools. What we lack is the ‘Will and persistence’ to implement what we already know”

--Alan Odden

“The real path to greatness, it turns out, requires simplicity and diligence. . . It demands each of us to focus on what is vital—and to eliminate all of the extraneous distractions”

---Jim Collins

Introduction

- ✓ The argument of this book is simple: if we choose to take **just a few well-known, straightforward actions, in every subject area**, we can make swift, dramatic improvements in schools.
- ✓ But the price of for such swift improvement is steep: Most schools would have to stop doing almost everything they now do in the name of school improvement. **Instead, they would have to focus on implementing “what is essential.”** Hardest of all, they would have to **“ignore the rest”** (Collins, 2001, p. 91)—*the fads, programs, and innovations that now prevent us from ensuring that every student in every school receives a quality education.*
- ✓ What is essential for schools? Three simple things: **reasonably coherent curriculum** (what we teach); **sound lessons** (how we teach); and far more purposeful reading and writing in every discipline, or **authentic literacy** (integral to both what and how we teach).
- ✓ But as numerous studies demonstrate, these three essential elements are only rarely implemented; every credible study confirms that they are still pushed aside by various initiatives, every year, in the majority of schools (Schmoker, 2006).
- ✓ The status quo has to change. We insult and frustrate our teachers and leaders when we keep asking them to adopt complex, confusing new initiatives and programs that can’t possibly succeed in the absence of decent curriculum, lessons, and literacy activities.

- ✓ In the last few years, I have found that educators yearn to be told something like this:

There will be no more initiatives—at least for a time. Instead, we will focus only on what will have an immediate and dramatic impact on learning in your classroom: common, content-rich curriculum: good lessons; and **plenty of meaningful literacy activities (such as close reading, writing, and discussion) across the curriculum.**

- ✓ If we understand and embrace the concept of simplicity, which starts with a recognition that **“less is more,”** then our schools will achieve what previous generations never thought possible. Best of all, none of the essential elements must be implemented perfectly to have their intended effect.

- ✓ About this book:
 - Chapter 1: Indeed, any initiative we adopt before the three essential elements are implemented only postpones their implementation and their impact on student learning . . . and doomed; it is built on sand. This is the primary lesson of the last 30 years of reform.

 - Chapter 2: Clarifies the simple, essential elements of what we should teach, including literacy--- reading, writing, and talking.
 - **Authentic literacy**—reading, writing, and talking, would ensure that virtually all students would be prepared for college, career, and citizenship. Such an education is not new, but it is at the center

 - Moreover, if we want “piercing clarity” (Collins, 2005, p. 17) about what to teach, we need to take **a hard-headed look at standard- both state and national. We need to be smart, even wary, consumers of these documents.** Intended to simplify and clarify course expectations, they often complicate and confound our attempts to provide coherent, quality curriculum in every course.

 - Chapter 3: Chapter 3 clarifies and **simplifies how we should teach to dramatically and immediately enhance any teacher’s impact on student learning.** This chapter ends with two straightforward templates that incorporate these fundamental elements. Variations on these two simple templates could be used for all or most of our teaching, in every subject area.

 - Chapter 4-7 describe the **what** and **how** we can effectively teach in each of the four subject areas: Language arts, social studies, science, and math. For each of the disciplines, Schmoker shares how **experts advocate for the same core practices—especially authentic literacy** (intensive integration of purposeful reading, writing and talking into each subject).
 - In addition, Schmoker gives extensive treatment to the need for large helpings of **current news and opinion pieces in class.** According to Schmoker, a “game-changing

impact on everything we hold dear: student engagement and retention, college preparation for all, and attitudes towards school—by students and teachers.

- ✓ Finally, in every chapter, Schmoker repeats, by design, the main elements and arguments of this book: **How** to teach, **what** to teach and **authentic literacy**.

CHAPTER 1: The Importance of Simplicity, Clarity and Priority

“Hedgehogs see what is essential and ignore the rest.”

--Jim Collins

- ✓ As odd as it sounds, simple, well-known strategies and structures drive improvement in any organization (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). In education, this means the general underperformance of schools can be directly attributed to a failure to implement three simple, well-known elements: common curriculum, sound lessons, and authentic literacy.
- ✓ As Allan Odden writes, our failure to improve schools in the last few years isn't because we lack funding or don't know how to improve schools. What we lack is the “will and persistence” to implement what we already know (Odden, 2009, p. 22). Or as Collins writes, the key to success is not innovation; it is “simplicity and diligence” applied with fierce devotion to our highest priorities (Collins, 2001b, p. 105).
- ✓ *The three elements are so potent they do not need to be implemented perfectly or with any special skill. Their profound impact will come largely from all teachers applying them consistently and reasonably well. Then, as teachers continue to work in teams to practice and refine their implementation, even better results will ensue.*
- ✓ The three elements we should approach with “simplicity and diligence” are:
 - **What We Teach:** This simply means a decent, coherent curriculum, with topics and standards collectively selected by a team of teachers from the school district- that is actually taught.
 - The number of “power standards” (Ainsworth, 2003a) must not be excessive; *it should account for about half of what is contained in our standards document (Marzano, 2003).*
 - Why is this so important? Because such “guaranteed and viable curriculum” (Marzano, 2003, p. 22) is perhaps the most significant school factor that affects learning. But such a curriculum is found in very few schools (Berliner, 1984; Marzano, 2003; Schmidt, 2008)

- **How We Teach:** Think of this simply as ordinary, structurally sound lessons that employ the same basic formula that educators have known for decades but few implement consistently.
- **Authentic Literacy:** Purposeful—and usually argumentative—reading, writing and talking (Lunsford & Ruszkiewics, 2009). Literacy is still the unrivalled, but grossly under-implemented, key to learning both content and thinking skills.
 - But, authentic literacy is categorically different from so-called “reading skills” and pseudo-standards that have wrought such havoc in language arts.
 - Believe it or don’t: ***These three elements, if even reasonably well-executed, would have more impact than all other initiatives combined.*** A content rich curriculum, sounds lessons, and authentic literacy would wholly redefine what public schools can accomplish with children of every socioeconomic stratum.
 - **Because of this, their satisfactory implementation should be our most urgent, jealously guarded priority---the ongoing focus of every team meeting, every professional development session, every monitoring and reporting effort.**
 - Until these elements are reasonably well implemented, it makes little sense to adopt or learn programs, technology or any other innovations. To be fair, any innovation is fair game once these elements are implemented if—but only if—that innovation does not in any way dilute or distract us from these always-vulnerable priorities.

✓ The Power of Simplicity, Clarity and Priority:

- **Consider a football team** that loses about half of its games, year after year. Each week, the coaches scour the Internet to find new, complex plays and offensive schemes.
 - This confuses the players, who never mastered the last set of plays. All the while, the coaches never fully note something very boring but important: the performance of their offensive line.
 - If they paid attention to what every coach knows, they would notice that their offensive linemen have never sufficiently mastered the fundamentals of effective blocking, like footwork and body position. If even reasonably well executed, these fundamentals make a tremendous—literally, “game-changing”—difference.
 - And so the solution to this team’s mediocre performance is really very simple: the coaches need to stop confusing the team with new plays and start focusing strenuously on the most mundane, but hugely effective, blocking techniques until they are implemented successfully.

- The palpable results—measured in successful plays, first downs, points scored, and games won—would be immediate and dramatic.
- **Consider a hospital** where infection rates are high. All doctors know the five basic procedures that inhibit infection. These procedures are “no-brainers”; known and taught for years. But, doctors don’t consistently implement them, even as they continue to attend various trainings in complex, cutting edge practices and procedures.
 - In fact, the doctors (like the coaches) aren’t fully cognizant that these simple, well known procedures are directly linked to results (i.e. mortality infections rates).
 - The solution to this hospital’s problem is simple, not complex: **checklist** is generated, and it’s importance is made crystal clear to doctors. In addition, the faithful use of the **checklist is monitored** to ensure that all doctors implement it properly and consistently.
 - The result in the case of the hospital used in the study? Infections immediately plummeted 11 percent to 0 percent and prevented 8 deaths and saved the hospital approximately \$2 million in lawsuits.
- If we educators can’t see ourselves and our schools in these two examples, I fear for us. They are both analogous to our failure in schools, where the simple elements of common curriculum, effective lessons, and the most ordinary but authentic kinds of literacy practices are well known but almost never clarified, reinforced, or monitored. As a result, they are rarely implemented (Schmoker, 2006).
- Clearly, the simple elements of effective schooling outlined here should be our highest priorities—implemented first, before we adopt any other initiative.

✓ Three Books That Reinforce the Power of Simplicity:

- **Good to Great , by Jim Collins**

- Collins found that “the essence of profound insight” into organizational improvement “is simplicity” (2001, p. 91).
 - That’s why he reverts hedgehogs, which do one thing well (roll into a ball to protect themselves), as opposed to foxes, which plan and plot and scheme as they “pursue many ends at the same time”.
 - Foxes aren’t simple; they are “scattered and diffused, moving on many levels- that’s why they fail. By contrast, hedgehogs, with their simple, singular focus, succeed because they commit entirely and exclusively to “what is and ignore the rest” (Collins, 2001, p. 91).

- To succeed, he notes, we must “attain piercing clarity about how to produce the best long-term results, and then exercise the relentless discipline to say, ‘no thank you’ to opportunities that fail the hedgehog test” (2005, p. 17).

- **The Knowing-Doing Gap, by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton**

- Simplicity, clarity and priority are intimately linked. For an organization to maintain a focus on its highest priorities, it must simplify and repeatedly clarify them so that everyone in the organizations knows implicitly *what to do* and *what not to do*.
- But priorities are fragile and high-maintenance. Without frequent, repeated clarification, we start to drift from them. The priorities inevitably start to mean different things to different people.
- If priorities aren’t incessantly simplified and clarified, they are always at the mercy of the next new thing, our natural forgetfulness, and a failure to protect the best (often old, already known) practices from encroachment of new, but less effective, practices or programs.
- According to Pfeffer and Sutton, leaders resist simplicity; they are often irrationally enamored with novelty and complexity, which prevents them from focusing on and implementing their core priorities (2000, p. 33).
 - The result is stagnation or decline. “Complexity,” the authors warn, “interferes with running knowledge into action”
 - Unfortunately, many leaders have a natural prejudice against “old ideas and simple prescriptions” – even though, if implemented, these old, simple ideas are the key to better results (p. 53).
 - Many leaders would rather launch new initiatives, regardless of their effectiveness. Why? Because it distracts them from the harder work of seeing to it that their highest, simplest priorities are implemented—“actually done” (p. 54).
- In contrast, successful organizations aren’t enamored with novelty, technology, or complexity; **they know that “success depends largely on implementing what is already known”** (p. 14).
 - They know that **“simple prescriptions”** conveyed with **“clarity and simplicity”** are the hallmarks of effective action and leadership (p. 55).

- At the successful companies profiled in Pfeffer and Sutton’s book, “implementation and simple knowledge” was the main driver of improvement (p. 15).
 - It is critical that schools learn the lesson that *“best practice” in effective organizations is rarely new practice.* On the contrary, the most effective actions are ‘well-known practices, with the extra dimension that they [are] reinforced and carried out reliably” (p. 14).
- **The One Thing You Need to Know, by Marcus Buckingham**

- ***Buckingham reinforces the importance of simplicity—the principle that we accomplish more when we focus on less.***

- Organizations must ***carefully determine their highest priorities***, their focus—even if it is only “one thing.” Having done so, organizations should then expend enormous amounts of organizational energy clarifying and simplifying those priorities—and resist any pursuit that could detract from them.

- After analyzing survey data, ***Buckingham found that employee crave simplicity and clarity; they want to know precisely what they can do to be most effective***—and then not be distracted from that.

- ***Their highest priorities—the “core” – must be clarified incessantly.*** “Clarity,” writes Buckingham, “is the antidote to anxiety . . . if you do nothing else as a leader, be clear (2005, p. 146).

- As Buckingham writes, “the old truisms tell us that *‘what gets measured gets managed’* and *‘you get what you inspect’* and they survive as truisms because they manifest true” (p. 176).

- It’s that simple: if we want better schools, ***we have to monitor the implementation of our highest priorities.*** Schoolchildren will continue to wait until we monitor and ensure that our priorities are being implemented.

✓ Three organizations that practices these truisms:

- **Best Buy:** Research revealed that the success of Best Buy’s sales forced hinged on one simple thing—the ability of salespeople to master and confidently explain the different features of the products they sold. That’s it. That’s their number-one, carefully protected focus. ***They reduced their product line by 50 percent so that salespeople could fully master their core inventory.***

- **Apple Computer:** Similarly, Apple Computers has been invited to embark on numerous new initiatives and partnerships. But, Steve Jobs has strenuously resisted heavy lobbying from those within and outside *his company and stayed true to one thing: “figuring out how to invent cool technology but making it wonderfully easy to use”*.
 - **Borax: Safety at the Core.** The *companies in-house research revealed that it’s simple core was safety*: if it could keep its employees safe from on-the-job accidents, then morale, efficiency, and profitability would take care of themselves.
 - At Borax, every meeting began with an anecdote about how injuries were averted by employees. *Leaders displayed and celebrated measurable benchmarks*, like the number of days without an accident and progress towards monthly and annual accident-reduction goals.
 - Borax succeeded because they reinforced their priority through constant clarification and communication, including what *Buckingham regards as the single most powerful way to motivate productive action: recognition and celebration*.
- ✓ In schools, leaders should collect and share analogous data on how many classrooms consistently exhibit common curriculum, sound lessons, and authentic literacy. *We should celebrate gains in any of these areas as we guide and advise teachers at faculty meetings*. And we should celebrate gains made each grading period on common assessments that themselves reflect the level of implementation of these three areas.
- ✓ Simplicity, Clarity, and Priority In One School
- One middle school familiar to Schmoker made sure both curriculum and instructional priorities were made crystal clear:
 - *They were clarified in teacher interviews and reinforced at every faculty and department meetings*. Priorities included the expectation that students would regularly write and revise two to three substantive papers per grading period.
 - *Moreover, priorities were reinforced and clarified at every faculty and department meeting. All professional development was internal, organized by department heads. No popular fads or programs or innovations were pursued or implemented.*
 - Instructional leadership was simple and strictly reinforced the priorities. The principal monitored the implementation of the curriculum and the elements of effective instruction by conducting one or two *brief classroom walkthroughs* each month.
 - *The principal also met briefly with teachers quarterly to discuss end-of-quarter evidence of student performance. If data from these conferences or observations*

revealed a concern, the teachers would be asked to observe and meet with others in the school who taught the common curriculum effectively; the teachers then were expected to teach in the same fashion.

- As a result of the stunningly simple model leadership, every teacher in that school actually taught the curriculum and actually provided sound lessons, almost every day.
- ✓ A simple, emphatic insistence on common curriculum, sound lessons and authentic literacy ought to be our common goal—the standard for our profession at the classroom, school, and district level.
- For this to happen, we need to be sure that what we want from our schools is precisely what we communicate—simply, clearly and persistently.
 - We simply need to be as obsessive about our “core” as Best Buy and Borax. We need, as Jim Collin tells us, to define our priorities with “piercing clarity” and then say “no thank you” to anything that would divert us from successfully implementing them.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT WE TEACH

Think of literacy as a spine; it holds everything together. The branches of learning connect to it, meaning that all core content teachers have a responsibility to teach literacy.

--Vicky Philips and Carina Wong

- ✓ What we teach—a guaranteed and viable curriculum—matters immensely. Curriculum may be the single largest factor that determines how many students in a school will learn (Marzano, 2003).
- ✓ The advocates of 21st century education cited in this chapter are urging us to go back to the future, to embrace—at long last—a powerful combination of the following strategies for all students:
- Adequate amounts of essential subject-area content, concepts and topics.
 - Intellectual/thinking skills (e.g. argument, problem solving, reconciling opposing views, drawing one’s own conclusion);
 - Authentic literacy—purposeful reading, writing, and discussion as the primary modes of learning both content and thinking skills.

- ✓ None of this is new; none of it is unique to this century. What is new is the recognition that now, more than ever, all students need—and deserve—such an education.
- ✓ Demands of 21st century careers and citizenship are increasingly similar to what students need to be prepared for college—whether they decide to attend college or not (Allington, 2001, Conley, 2005, Hirsch, 2009; Rotherham, 2008, Schmoker, 2006).
 - On study, by ACT, found about 90 percent overlap between the needs of workers and those who attend college, and recommends that **“all high school students should experience a common academic core that prepares them for both college and workforce training, regardless of their future plans”**
 - Common sense tells us that any semblance of a decent curriculum should and could contain a “common academic core—generous amounts of good content and critical thinking skills, and sufficient opportunities to learn to read, write, speak and listen effectively.
 - The problem is that the actual taught curriculum is marked by a stark, irrational absence of the most fundamental knowledge and literacy skills needed to do well in college or university.
 - Let’s be frank: We all know college grads who aren’t particularly brilliant, disciplined, or intellectually oriented. We know, with a moment’s reflection, that the requirements for earning some kind from any number of two to four-year institutions are hardly prohibited or unrealistic.
 - So if we sincerely desire to make college an option for record numbers of students, our task is simple: **We need to redirect those hours towards those hours [hours squandered on non- academic activities] the most simple, obvious tasks that prepare students for college, career, and citizenship: meaningful reading, writing, speaking, and thinking—around adequately coherent body of content in the subject areas.**
- ✓ As Phil Schlechty, author of *Schools for the 21st Century* (1990), notes, “Too many children leave school without having developed the skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that will equip them for life in the 21st century” (1997, p. 2).
 - The civic, intellectual, and workplace demands of the new century, writes Schlechty, will require that *all students read, write and cipher . . . think and solve problems . . . draw upon rich vocabulary based on a deep understanding of language and the human condition*” (1990, p. 40)

- We can't be satisfied with only providing such an education to the most privileged (1997, p. 12). We need to provide such an **"elite education for nearly everybody"** (1997, p. 40)
- ✓ Any credible curriculum has to embody the link between knowledge and critical thinking (usually done as we read, talk, or write),
 - To critically analyze various documents requires engagement with content and a framework within which to place the information. It's impossible, for instance, to critically analyze the American Revolution without understanding the facts and context surrounding that event (2008, p. 1).
 - E.D. Hirsch (2008) similarly argues that the abilities to argue, evaluate, and reason are "attained by studying a rich curriculum in math, literature, science, history, geography, music and art and learning higher-level skills in context . . . there is a scientific consensus that academic skill is highly dependent on specific relevant knowledge"
 - Acquiring such knowledge is the result of a "slow, tenacious and effective buildup of knowledge and vocabulary" (p. 40). Happily, this critical buildup is best **acquired through disarmingly simple, age-old teaching methods that can be captured in two simple versatile templates.**
 - Daniel Willingham, the prominent cognitive scientist, concurs in "Education for the 21st Century: Balancing Content Knowledge with Skills": "Critical is in fact highly dependent on content knowledge. We can't understand, much less critically evaluate the ideas in a textbook, newspaper, or magazine if they contain too much unfamiliar information. If we don't know enough about the subject we're reading about, we may bog down and become confused as we read (2008).
 - We acquire knowledge and thinking skills best when we learn them reciprocally; when we are asked to read, write, argue, and problem solve as we engage with text and with an organized body of essential knowledge.
 - **Willingham found that we learn and retain information best when we have a chance to evaluate or think about it.** He suggest we give students "simple tasks" that allow them to intellectually engage with the content they are learning (2009a, p. 63).
 - Thoughtful engagement with content knowledge should include a redoubled emphasis on textbooks as well as sources of current information, like newspapers and magazines.
 - **Advanced literacy can be acquired by all, using simple, endlessly repeatable activities.**

- ✓ How important is literacy? Let's listen again to E.D Hirsch:

To impart adequate verbal competence is the most important single goal of schooling in any nation. Good verbal scores diminish the notorious income gap. *Decades of data show that the earnings gap between racial and ethnic groups in the United States largely disappear when language competence in Standard English is factored in. (2010, p. 31).*

- Under-developed literacy skills are the number one reason why students are retained, assigned to special education, given long term remedial services and why they fail to graduate from high school. (2005, p. 29).
- ✓ It is impossible to overstate the importance of literacy. Because literacy is so important, so foundational to learning in every subject, we must be crystal clear about what it is and what it is not.

- According to Howard Gardner (2009), *"The most valued people in the 21st century are those who can survey a wide range of sources, decide which is most important and worth paying attention to, and then put this information together in ways that make sense to oneself and, ultimately, to other . . . they will rise to the top of the pack"* (p. 18)
- Thomas Friedman, author of the bestseller *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century* (2005), concludes that the most successful people in this century will be those who can acquire and use knowledge to develop and communicate creative combinations of ideas, applications, and strategies to solve problems.
 - How are these 21st century abilities acquired? From something he sees as an alarming decline: "plain old reading and writing" (p. 353).

- ✓ **Questions and Texts: an Essential Combination:**

There is nothing complicated here. We simply need to teach students to read deeply and purposefully to answer such questions—and to then discuss and write (even briefly) about the text and what they learned from it. This is the essence of learning and literacy. As Peter Cookson writes "Socrates believed that we learn best by asking essential questions and testing tentative answers against reason and fact in a continual . . . circle of honest debate" (2009, p. 8)

- It is especially important for teams of teachers in every discipline to make the development and refinement of good, text-based questions among their highest priorities.
 - Such inquiry driven learning, reading and discussion should periodically culminate in a more extended writing and, for certain assignments, public presentations—which, according to Arnold Parker, have become "essential in the 21st century job market" (2007, p. 2).

- ✓ Literacy is integral to both what and how we teach; it's the spine that holds everything together and ties content together in every subject. The best teaching emerges from this simple combination of a good question and good text—in every subject.

Conley's "Standards for Success". Conley and his colleagues conducted a landmark, in-depth study of the skills and content students need to succeed in college. The following four "standards of success" or "habits of mind" operate as both thinking and literacy skills for all subjects and can powerfully inform student reading, writing, and talking in every subject:

- Read to infer/interpret/draw conclusions
- Support arguments with evidence
- Resolve conflicting views encountered in source documents
- Solve complex problems with no obvious answer

- ✓ The Case for Drastically Reducing Content Standards. *We should reduce the content contained in most standards documents by about 50 percent—even more in language arts.* It stands to reason that if we have fewer standards but reach them in adequate depth, students will learn more, retain more, and learn to think. And test scores will take care of themselves.

- Larry Ainsworth and Doug Reeves have worked with schools and districts for many years, helping them to reduce the amount of standards they teach. They start with *Marzano's recommendation that we should eliminate about two-thirds of the standards* (Marzano & Kendall, 1998).

- According to Ainsworth, he and his colleagues from Doug Reeve's Leadership and Learning Center have had consistent success selecting only a fraction of the standards and making them their priority.

- In Los Angeles, a Title 1 school adopted Singapore's in-depth approach in math, with its greatly reduced number of standards. The very first year of implementation, the schools students' scores on the California math exam rose from 45 to 76 percent- a 32 percent increase (lanbderg, 2008).

- **Clearly we need to simplify the curriculum—to drastically reduce the number of standards to those with the highest priority:**

- As Doug Reeves (2004) contends, a good set of priority standards about 88 percent of the items on the state test, but not 100 percent. If you go after the extra 12 percent you will have to cover too many standards and have less time for the truly essential ones. But, focus on the most essential standards promotes both learning and higher test scores.

- **Doug Reeves' criteria for selecting essential standards:**
 - **Endurance:** Will the standard provide students with knowledge and skills beyond a single test date?
 - **Leverage:** Will the standard provide knowledge and skills that are of value in multiple disciplines?
 - **Readiness for the Next Level:** Will the standard provide the student with essential knowledge and skills that are necessary for their success at the next level?

- **Steps to reducing standards:**
 - Everyone review and **select 40-50 percent of the standards.**
 - Dot-voting to determine which get the higher votes
 - Display results of standards with most votes on the projector and discuss this list of **"power standards"**
 - Lay on a grid by grading period and estimate how many days to devote to each.
 - Arrange so as not to consume more than 15 to 16 weeks out of an 18 week semester (leaving room for teachers to spend more time on preferred topics)
 - Course alike teams to **develop units and lessons**, assign appropriate texts and textbook pages with **good questions** and prompts to develop **common assessments**
 - **Data** from end of quarter or end of unit assessments become primary tools for monitoring progress.

CHAPTER 3: HOW WE TEACH

Improved classroom instruction is the prime factor to improve student achievement gains.

--Allan Odden and Marc Wallace

- ✓ It is now a well established fact that that even three years of fairly ordinary but effective teaching can completely change the academic trajectory of low achieving students—vaulting them from the lowest to the highest quartile (Bracey, 2004; Sanders & Horn, 1994).
 - According to The Atlantic journalist Amanda Ripley “the most stunning finding to come out of education research in the past decade” is that in even the worst schools, the most simple, ordinary teaching strategies overcome all other factors by significant margins.

- What makes these findings most interesting is that “effective teaching” is not some complex combination of talent, technique, or long experience. Effective instruction consists primarily of just a few ordinary, largely whole-class teaching practices that we have known about for decades.
 - The impact of these practices are so profound that Marzano has concluded they should be “routine components of every lesson” (207, p. 180).

✓ **Good lessons include:**

- **Clear Learning Objective:** should be a topic, skill or concept selected from the agreed upon curriculum.
- **Teaching/Modeling/Demonstrating:** these are variations on lecture or direct teaching—explaining, demonstrating, instructing etc.
- **Guided Practice:** throughout the lesson, in brief intervals, the teachers should allow students to practice or apply what has been taught or modeled (while the teacher observes and guides their work).
- **Checks for Understanding/Formative Assessment:** As students practice, and in between each step in the lesson, the teacher should conduct “formative assessment” by checking—assessing—to see how many students have mastered that particular step.
 - This ongoing “*check for understanding*” allows the teacher to see what needs to be clarified or explained in a different way, when to slow down, or when it’s all right to speed up the pace of the lesson.
 - Circulating, observing, and listening as students work in pairs
 - Calling on a sampling of students or pairs randomly
 - Having students signal their understanding: thumbs up or down, red, green, yellow popsicle sticks etc.
 - Having students hold up dry-erase boards with answers or solutions.
- There is nothing new here. What is new is the realization that these seemingly “boring and pedestrian” (Collins, 2001, p. 142) practices are not only effective, but astonishingly so. If they were consistently implemented, we would take a quantum leap towards the goal of “learning for all”.

✓ **Effective Instruction:**

- **Madeline Hunter:** Anticipatory (create interest/connect to prior knowledge), Direct Instruction/modeling (small steps), Guided Practice, Checking for Understanding.
- **Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey:** Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Checking for Understanding 2007).
- **Marilyn Burns:** Models (steps), Guided Practices, Frequent Checks for Understanding, ReModel (teach again), frequent Think-pair-share and repeat the cycle.

- **Robert Marzano:** Clear learning goal and chunk instruction to optimize learning. Between chunks feedback on learning is gathered and this determines next steps (The Art and Science of Teaching).

✓ The Stunning Impact of Effective Lessons:

- Research explicitly supports “sequenced set of subskills . . . in step by step building blocks” (2008) and frequent checking for understanding. The effects of formative assessments on learning are “among the largest ever reported”:
 - 20 or 30 times as much positive impact on learning than most popular current initiatives
 - Are about 10 times as cost-effective as reduced class size
 - Would add between 6 and 9 months of additional learning growth per year.
 - Students would learn four times as fast as a result of it’s consistent use (William, 2007, p. 186).
 - Only three years of effective teaching will catapult students in the lowest quartile into the third or even fourth quartile (Haycock, 2003).
 - Effective teaching could eliminate the achievement gap in about five years (Kain & Hanushek in Schmoker, 2006).
 - The highest performing teachers ensure that students learn twice as much material in the same amount of time as their peers (Garmaut, 2007).
 - Frequently checking for understanding showed to have the biggest difference in student achievement (Ripley, 2010, p. 5)

✓ When Teachers Truly Use Formative Assessments

- As you can see from profiles below, educators’ success were in no way attributed to the use of complicated strategies, technology, or specious attempts to group student by “learning styles” or ability:
- Primary Grade Reading Teacher:
 - At this high poverty elementary school, students learn to read two to three times as fast as their peers, often outperforming affluent schools.
 - Their secret is that they spend far less time than their peers attempting to tutor multiple individuals or small groups while most of the students sit passively, waiting for their turn to learn (Ford & Opitz, 2002).
 - From day one, these teachers prefer to provide well-organized, whole class lessons, replete with continuous checks for understanding.
- Middle School English Teachers:
 - 45% f/r lunch raised test scores to the highest in the state

- Two teachers revamped their teaching around a simple formula: effective whole-class instruction in reading, discussion, and writing. All students discussed and wrote argumentative papers about the same readings.
 - Their lessons were models of step-by-step instruction and formative assessment.

- High School Social Science teacher:
 - AP Social Studies teacher in a high poverty school where almost twice as many of his students passed the AP History exam as in the affluent school.
 - The majority of simple lessons were “interactive lecture”: whole-class lecture and note-taking, punctuated by frequent opportunities for student to pair, share and process their thinking.
 - He was always circulating, listening as students discussed, and checking for understanding to ensure they were taking good notes as he adjusted his instruction on this basis.

- Sean Connors, High School Teacher:
 - Very ordinary but effective lesson that always included careful modeling, the use of exemplars (for any writing lesson), and lot’s of think, pair, share with continuous checks for understanding and adjustments of instruction.

- One of the best ways to ensure consistent implementation of sound curriculum is to create and employ a general lesson template throughout the school. Adlai Stevenson High School (Richard DuFour) benefited greatly from the implementation of such a template.

✓ [A Common, General Lesson Template at Adlai Stevenson High School](#)

- At Stevenson, there is a clear, written curriculum for every course, focused on a severely reduced set of standards determined by same-course instructors.
- Common end of grading and course assessments to help teachers make adjustments to instruction—and allow leaders to monitor the implementation of common curriculum.
- To ensure consistency and to reinforce elements of good lessons, teachers work from a common lesson format that explains precisely those features described here.
- Lessons are to be taught in small steps. For example, in Math teachers model only one or two problems and let students practice only those one or two problems while the teacher circulates. There should be at least four or five such cycles in any class period.

- They are: small steps, the modeling, and most importantly, the multiple cycles of guided practice informed, throughout, by checks of understanding.
 - Real time same-day “formative” assessments is the heart of an effective lesson.
 - They don’t want to see teachers sitting at their desks. At Stevenson, this is “one of the primary things we look for when we tour classrooms as a team. *Then we report back what we saw.”

*Re walkthroughs: such tours are indispensable. They should be conducted by at least two people who then report on all-school patterns of growth or need for improvement. Schmoker is less optimistic about walkthroughs as a primary way to provide individual teacher with feedback they are not always ready to accept.

- ✓ **Interactive Lecture and direct teaching:** focus is on teachers words and directions and students take part in lots of pair-sharing, note-taking, or quick-writing.
 - Lecture proves to be a marvel of efficiency, allowing us to cover a lot of ground quickly. [But done improperly] lecture becomes a waste of precious classroom time.
 - [Interactive Lecture] dramatically increases students’ understanding of new information across content areas and at every grade level –**Robert Marzano**
 - Lecture, done wrong, is among the most boring , least effective forms of teaching. Done right, however, it is highly engaging and among the most effective ways to cover generous amounts of content.
 - Findings show that interactive lecture and the simplest versions of formative assessments work for anyone. They increase achievement independent of the personality of the instructor (Mazur, 1997).
 - When something this simple and readily available can have a game-changing impact, shouldn’t its implementation be given our highest priority in both college and K-12?
 - In their book *The Strategic Teacher*, Silver, Strong and Perini (2007) recommend the lecture begin with “anticipator” step – with a “hook”, a question, or a link to previous learning.
 - Background information or question (establish purpose and stimulate curiosity. Questions are forms of argument that require students to make inferences and draw conclusions.

- Students get a chance to **respond to the question, by writing and/or talking in pairs**. Teacher calls on a few of them as a way to randomly **“check for understanding”—to see if they understood the task** or if they needed additional instruction before moving to the next step in the lecture.
- The next few **activities are delivered in small, ordered steps**, between which students “practice” their knowledge by talking, writing, (often in the form of notes), or both.
- These “periodic thinking reviews” give students the chance **to process their learning by “drawing conclusions and making inferences”** (identical language found in Conley’s [2005] intellectual standards.
- All the while the teacher is **observing and listening to ensure that all students are satisfactorily learning** before the teacher moves on to the next part of the lecture.
- According to Marzano, this process **“dramatically increases students’ understanding of new information across content areas and at every grade level”**
- As with any good lesson, it is critical that the information in the lecture should be segmented into “chunks” or “small digestible bites”. Good lessons respect the limits of memory and the average attention span; importantly, learners need the chance to process new information ever few minutes.
- **The Five-Minute Limit: Teachers should talk for “no more than five minutes” before giving students an opportunity to process** the new information—to write or to interact with their peers
- Every few minutes we should let students process the new learning by:
 - **Reviewing** their notes and adding any new insights or connections
 - **Summarizing** their learning
 - **Paring up to compare and contract** notes, perceptions, and connections
- Failure to give students these opportunities is what makes most lectures boring and ineffective. Without these, it is a long, dull day, one we would never wish on ourselves. These processes themselves—**taking notes, reviewing notes, and summarizing—must themselves be modeled regularly**
 - **Checking for Understanding: Stopping points allow teachers to formatively monitor and assess learning (and on-task behavior) by calling randomly on students and walking round the room to listen and review—continuously checking for understanding (Marzano, 2009, p. 87)**

- If students are confused or do not understand the content in a particular chunk, the teacher should **revisit or reteach** that information before moving on to another chunk.
- As we lecture, we must ensure that all are engaged—not just those who raise their hands. We must **ensure that every student is responding**, multiple times, to questions throughout the lecture.
- If this process seems slow remember such “slow” interactive teaching can account for as much as “400 percent speed of learning differences” and **an additional six to nine months of learning growth per year** (William, 20007, p. 186).
- In sum, interactive lecture can be a “marvel of efficiency” (Silver et al, 2007). It can promote learning for all like few other lessons in our repertoire. Moreover, it can be effective regardless of the personality of the teacher (Mazur, 1997). Therefore, mastery and the continuous refinement of it’s execution should be among the team’s and schools highest priorities.

✓ **Literacy-based lessons** (read, talk, and write) with a focus on text.

- Think of literacy as a spine; it holds everything together. The branches of learning connect to it, meaning that all core content teachers have a responsibility to teach literacy – Vicky Phillips and Carina Wong
- For all the value in interactive lecture and direct teaching, perhaps the largest portion of the curriculum should be built around authentic literacy activities in every subject area.
- This simple, age old (older than Socrates), three part template consists of the following:
 - **Close reading**/underlining annotation of texts
 - **Discussion** of the text
 - **Writing** about the text informed by close reading, discussion and annotation
- For centuries, the above activities have been the heart of both what we learn and how we learn, the key to acquiring both the knowledge and intellectual acumen that transform lives and overcome poverty like no other factor.
- Ironically, 30 years of school innovation have had the bizarre consequence of driving authentic literacy underground and supplanting it almost to extinction. Kelly Gallagher termed this “readicide” (the murder of reading).

- Real students in thousands of schools were denied an education as reformers tinkered with school structure. Like every other reform, this one forgot that intensive amounts of reading and writing are the soul of learning.

- The effectiveness of this three part template hinges on the same factors that attract people to book clubs: the chance to acquire knowledge as we read for meaning and express and compare our thoughts and perceptions with others.

- Teaching Vocabulary:
 - Before reading any text, always be sure to teach any vocabulary that could impede understanding. This simple step can often make a seemingly inaccessible text accessible to all.

- Establishing a Purpose for the Reading:
 - To create interest in the content of the text, share background information about the topic, read an interesting selection from the text, or help students connect it to recent or previous learning.

 - Then comes the main event: ***a question or prompt, linked as often as possible intellectual skills***, such as those Conley (2005) recommends (making inferences, drawing conclusions, analyzing and forming arguments, resolving/synthesizing conflicting opinions, or problem solving).
 - We do these things because students, regardless of grade level, will read with greater interest when we get their attention and when we give them clear, legitimate task or purpose for their reading.

 - The quality and availability of good questions is an essential engagement and interest as students read, discuss and write. Teams should make the refinement of good text-based questions among their highest priorities--- creating banks of temporary and permanent questions readily available to all teachers, trying the questions and then discussing results.
 - Author and teacher Kelly Gallagher gives his students their final exam question before they begin reading an assigned novel (2009).

 - Once we are sure the students grasp the question (by conducting a quick checking for understanding), we then tell them how they are going to be assessed. Assessments can be done in any of the following ways:
 - A review of students' notes or annotations (done in a quick walk-around).
 - Actual writing (often graded quickly, checked off, or scanned)
 - Participating in a discussion
 - All three of the above over the course of multiday lesson or unit all with an eye to *reducing time spent talking home or grading papers

- The purpose of reading normally requires active processing—whether we have student annotate, take notes, or summarize their thoughts at certain points in the reading.
 - But, we must teach students explicitly how to do such active reading—routinely, at every grade level, and at least twice a week in every course. It all starts with modeling or “thinking aloud.”
- Modeling higher-order reading; With a little practice, teachers can quickly learn to model such reading.
 - After teaching any troublesome vocabulary, we establish purpose by asking an inferential/argumentative question.
 - We now show students how we would read the text, and what we would underline or annotate as we “think aloud”.
 - Frequently modeling of reading, underlining, and annotating, in every course, is critical to accelerate the attainment of core intellectual processes—several years ahead of time.
 - Some won’t ever learn to critically unless we show them how we do such reading several times per week with all kinds of texts, including newspapers or history and social science textbooks.
 - After we model how we would read, underline, annotate, or take notes, students are ready to practice such reading themselves alone, then in pairs—with our guidance.
- Guided Practice and Formative Assessment. The next step is to have student practice, by themselves, the same kind of reading, note-taking, or annotating that you’ve just modeled, with the next paragraph or section of text. As they practice, check for understanding to see if additional clarification or modeling is needed:
 - **Circulate as students underline, annotate or take notes.** Are students underlining appropriately? If not, you must provide additional modeling or instruction to provide better clarity.
 - **Have students pair up and share.** Students should frequently pair up and share their notes, annotations, or underlined text with each other. Again, talking is not only one of the best ways to digest information, it is also a needed break and a low-threat opportunity for students to get feedback from peers on their ability to read for meaning.
 - As students pair up, you should circulate, listening to the conversations (but this is not the time to tutor individuals as this may impede the flow and pace of the lesson).
 - **Call on random pairs to share their thoughts.** This gives students the opportunity to express themselves in a more public mode while also giving you a feel for how ready they are for independent practice and how best to clarify or model the active reading process in a different way.

- Once students have the benefit of close reading, annotating, and partner-sharing, they will be eager to discuss and debate issues they find their textbooks, historical documents, and editorials, or in print and online publications like TIME for Kids.
- For example: The pros and cons of T. Boone Pickens’s “Plan for Energy Independence”
- Healthcare legislation—good or bad policy?
- President Obama’s 2008 Philadelphia speech justifying his relationship with Reverend Wright.
- President Lincoln’s second inaugural address. Would it be conciliatory or inflammatory to the average Southerner of the time?

- We greatly underestimate both the educational power and enjoyment students derive from such discussions or debates, if they adequately prepared them by following steps described above.

- A good discussion is not a free-for-all; it should be tied directly to the posted learning goal or question and follow **simple procedures** that should be explicitly taught and reinforced like any good lesson”
 - Always cite the text when making an argument
 - When disagreeing with another’s conclusion, argument solutions, briefly restate what they said, don’t interrupt, and be civil and respectful.
 - Be concise and stay on point.
 - Avoid distracting verbal tics (such as “like” or “you know”)

- **One cannot overestimate the value of such discussion.** Discussion skills are critical in every sphere and as preparation for individual presentations. *They are not only for the college-bound or the gifted; they are for all students, who deserve to participate in them regularly—at least twice a week in most courses.*

- Student Writing, with Reference to the Text. Writing from short scribbles to more formal pieces, profits from the previous processes of close reading, annotating, and discussion. Armed with these understandings, students should return to the text to do the following:
 - Quietly review and re-read their notes
 - Arrange or organize the best of these thoughts, quotes and data into a quick list of formal outline
 - Write: across the curriculum, the majority of the writing assignments would be just this simple. Frequency is paramount, but most of these almost-daily assignments don’t need to be formally guided—only completed, checked off, or given credit if a quick glance reveals them to be an honest attempt to cite the text and respond appropriately to a question or prompt.
 - Some assignments might be evaluated, in less or more depth, for content or clarify. Others, in language arts, could be evaluated for the finer points of composition and mechanics.

- Used right, the templates directly address the essential intellectual skills described by David Conley (2005); the ability to read for inferences, analyze, and synthesize conflicting viewpoints, support argument with evidence, and solve open-ended problems.
- Any teacher can begin implementing and refining the use of the two templates in team-based PLC's. If we learned and implemented them in conjunction with a coherent curriculum, students would receive an education that equips them, like never before, for the rigors and pleasures of contributive college, career, and citizenship.

F* See Write More, Grade Less at www.mikeschmoker.com